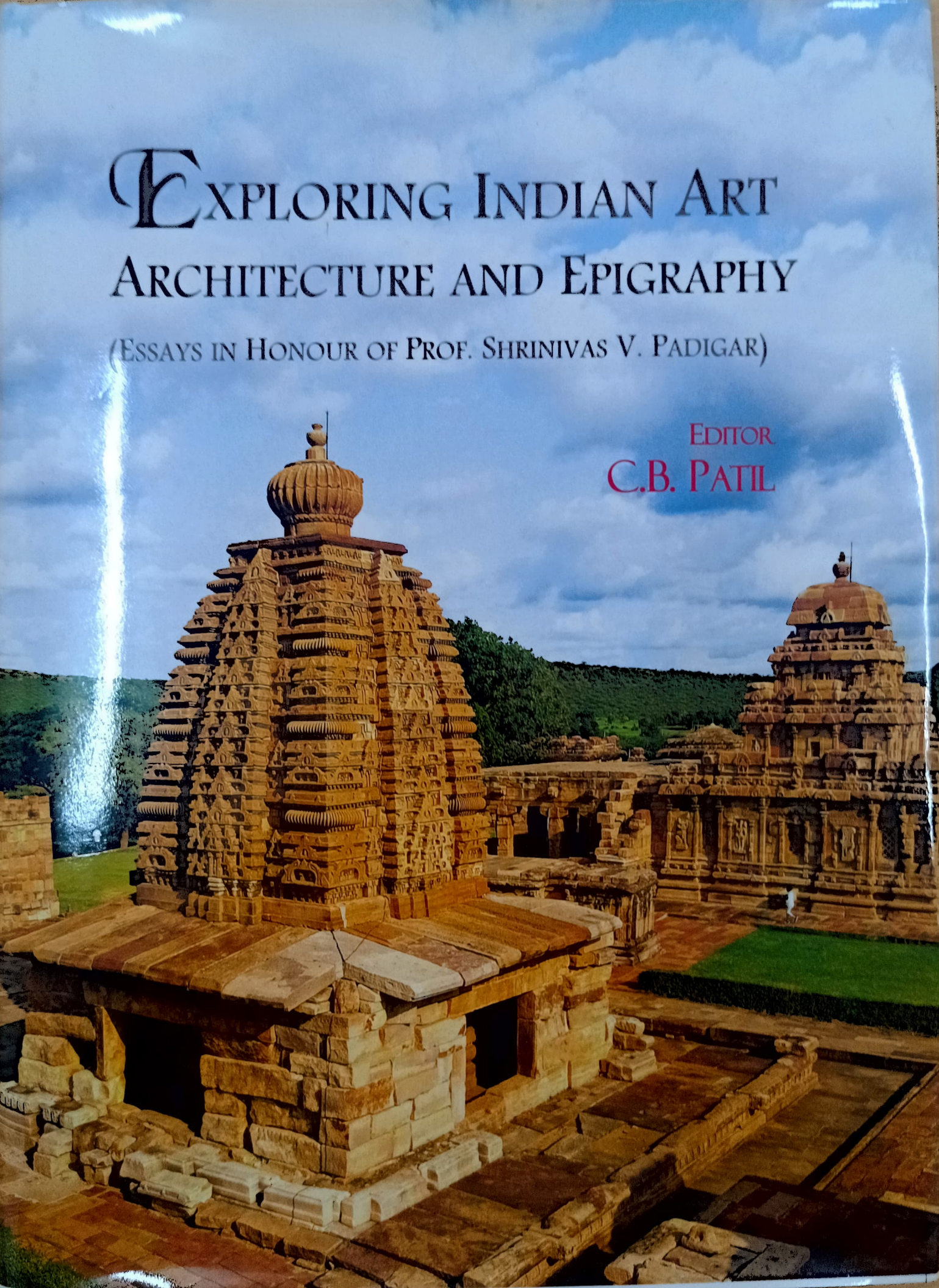
Exploring Indian Art

Architecture and Epigraphy

(Essays in Honour of Prof. Shrinivas V. Padigar)

Editor
C.B. Patil



With best wishes
for Dr. R.H. Kulkarni
1.2.06.26

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(Vol. II)

EDITOR
C.B. PATIL

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Reassessing the Date of Ceiling Paintings in Virūpākṣa Temple at Hampi and Identification of Pontiff's Portrait

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Abstract

Ceiling paintings in mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa of Virūpākṣa temple at Hampi are reckoned to be important examples of Vijayanagara paintings. Their date is debated, but in theme and technique of execution the paintings imply a continuity in Karnataka's mural tradition as much as they stand as precursors to the succeeding painting traditions. This paper argues that the paintings should be considered as the product of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya's time. So also, the paper questions the accepted view that the figure of pontiff in procession scene represents Śrī Vidyāraṇya and argues for identifying the spiritual personality with Śrī Vyāsatīrtha, a contemporary Mādhva pontiff historically closely associated with Kṛṣṇadēvarāya.

Key words

Hampi, Kṛṣṇadēvarāya, Vidyāraṇya, Vijayanagara paintings, Virūpākṣa temple, Vyāsarāya, Vyāsatīrtha.

Situated on the southern bank of the River Tuṅgabhadrā, the Virūpākṣa or Pampāpati temple complex with a wide and long bazar in front of it is an awe-inspiring monument at Hampi, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its core dates

from the Rāṣṭrakūṭa period, and it has since endured additions, renovations and conservation from time to time. It has been a sacred site frequented by innumerable devotees since ancient times. The main temple consists of a *garbhagṛha*, an *antarāla*, an *ardha-maṇṭapa*, a *gūḍha-maṇṭapa* and a large *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa*, referred to as *raṅgamaṇṭapa* in inscriptions, all arranged on west-east axis, and enclosed in a cloistered enclosure divided into two courtyards. The lofty eastern *gōpura* gives access to the outer court while the smaller, inner eastern *gōpura* leads to the inner court having numerous subsidiary shrines.[1]

The ornate, open *mahā-maṇṭapa* is oblong on its west-east axis, with varieties of composite pillars of considerable height which divide the space into a nave and aisles. The roof of the nave is raised further up. On the ceiling are numerous magnificent paintings, well known to art historians. An inscription setup to the left side of this *maṇṭapa* dated 1510 CE informs that it was Kṛṣṇadēvarāya who raised the *raṅgamaṇṭapa* and a *gōpura* in front of the shrine (of Virūpākṣa), caused repairs to the great *gōpura (hiriya-gōpura)* in front, and made several donations to the God Virūpākṣa.[2]

The entire central ceiling is covered with paintings of popular *Paurāṇic* themes. The artist has followed the traditional technique to delineate the themes and compositions. The paintings appear to have been done on dry surface (background) of lime mortar. The paintings follow dry techniques (fresco-secco). The mural painting tradition from the early Chālukya, Rāṣṭrakūṭa, later Chālukya through to these Hampi paintings form an integral part of the rich tradition of painting in ancient Karnataka.[3]

Distribution of Themes

The *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* ceiling paintings are divided into various compartments such as: squares, rectangles, and oblong shapes, ultimately forming a harmonious composition. Thematically, these murals may be broadly divided into eight main compositions: (i) Trimūrtis – Brahmā, Śiva, and Viṣṇu – seated on throne with their spouses and retinues, depicted as individual compositions; (ii) 'Girijā-kalyāṇa' episode depicted in an oblong composition; (iii) Aṣṭadikpālakas[4] on vehicles, followed by two important episodes connected to Śiva mentioned under (iv); (iv) Śiva as Tripurāri (destroyer of the three cities) in a square composition; 'Manmatha-vijaya' episode[5] (Victory over Kāma who caused disturbance to Śiva's penance, leading to Kāma's destruction, also called '*Kāma-dahana*') depicted in a square composition (v) Daśāvatāras (ten incarnations of Viṣṇu) in an oblong panel (the panel has in the beginning the depiction of Ratī on Pañcha Nārī Turaga and at the depiction of Manmatha on Nava Nārī Kuñjara); (vi) episodes of Rāma breaking Śiva *dhanuṣa* and wedding Sītā and Arjuna shooting an arrow at fish (Matsya Yantra) and winning Ḍraupadī's hand; (vii) chariots – depicting *Mahābhārata* episodes; and (viii) the famous panel depicting the "Pontiff's procession" in which at the beginning the *Gōpikā Vastrāpaharaṇa* episode is depicted and at the end is an image of Virūpākṣa Śiva Liṅga in a rectangular frame (fig. 31.1). On the side beams of the hall, there are interesting depictions of

individual themes including a few from *Mahābhārata* and *Kṛṣṇacharita*. Images of certain pontiffs may also be seen.

Dating the Ceiling Paintings

The ceiling paintings have been debated for quite some time now and the suggested dates vary between 1400 to 1800 CE. In 1936, Paramashivan[6] who recognized their importance, classified Vijayanagara paintings into three main groups spanning between fifteenth to seventeenth centuries and placed the *mahā-raṅgamaṇḍapa* paintings in the first group, viz. fifteenth century. After two decades, Kotraiah,[7] quoting the *mahā-raṅgamaṇḍapa* inscription dated 1510 CE as evidence, suggested that these paintings might belong to the sixteenth century and were possibly executed under the patronage of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya sometime after 1508. In 1968, Sivaramamurti[8] identified the different themes in these paintings and of the pontiff as that of Śrī Vidyāraṇya. He writes 'The long procession, with Vidyāraṇya in a palanquin.... is an impressive scene of the fourteenth century, recorded a century later'. According to him these paintings belonged to the fifteenth century. Rajashekhara[9] who compared these paintings to those from Siddēśvara temple at Holalgundi in Andhra Pradesh arrived at the conclusion that the murals at Hampi were executed after 1565 and possibly in the first half of the seventeenth century. At the turn of the twentieth century Anna Dallapiccola[10] says that the costumes of soldiers suggest a time span between the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century. She concludes that 'it is possible that some local patron commissioned the paintings when the temple started functioning again in the early years of the nineteenth century. This would account not only for the paintings in the *mahā-raṅgamaṇḍapa*, but also for the extensive stucco work decorating the parapets of the buildings in the inner courtyard of the temple as well as, possibly, the east gōpura gracing the complex'.

The various dates so for suggested call for a reconsideration. Shivaramamurti's[11] view that the paintings belong to the fifteenth century cannot be accepted because the *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* in which the paintings are executed was completed only in 1510, i.e. sixteenth century, as was shown by Kotraiah.[12] Rajashekhara[13] argued that motifs of *tōraṇa*, birds and *śikhara* do not figure in Vijayanagara paintings till 1565 and therefore Hampi murals belonged to post 1565 period and were executed in the first half of seventeenth century. Anna Dallapiccola's view[14] that the paintings belonged to the early nineteenth century is based on the details and style of the painting of 'pontiff's procession'. According to her, the soldiers depicted in this painting have spotted dress, Maratha-like head gear, and hold long muskets and they can compare with the soldiers found in the paintings of Tipu in the Dariya Daulat Bagh in Srirangapatna. However, it should be pointed out that 'the spotted dress' was not limited to paintings of Tipu's period. There are similar features in figural depictions in the paintings of Tērumallēśvara temple at Hiriyuru[15] in Karnataka prior to Tipu's time. A careful observation of the hunting scenes on Mahānavamī Dibba and dancing scenes on Hazāra Rāma temple at Hampi, reveals a strong similarity in sketching

the figures. Images employed to compose episodes in the Hampi ceiling paintings have strong artistic leanings to their precursors in stucco and Hoysaḷa art. The figures in Hoysaḷa sculptures have small circular spotted dresses in several examples. Therefore, the date of pontiff's procession painting goes well with the Kṛṣṇadēvarāya's time.

The other paintings like those of Trinity with consorts, Girijā-kalyāṇa, Manmatha Vijaya, Tripura Saṁhāra and others have well organized compositions. Their iconographic details are very much refined and follow already set examples. Stylistically, entire ceiling murals of *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* belong to one artistic hand/style. The composition of the themes and delineation of the figures is very much homogenous. Formally, all compositions have rectangular structures, further divided vertically into sub-sections to accommodate figures on either side. The figures are organized on a same bottom line-base line. Their standing posture is on horizontal composition and juxtaposition of figures and separated by the colours. Colours play important role. Varied hues have been created. Similarly, artist has adopted contemporary designs and in the absence of the names of artists, it may only be postulated that the paintings have been executed by a single style and hand. Figures used in this composition have identical appearance. Paintings of Vīrabhadrēśvara temple at Lepakshi in Andhra Pradesh are also equally important examples. The themes and delineation of these paintings have different hand altogether. But the methods and material are the same as that of Hampi examples. The artist's hand differs at Lepakshi when compared to Hampi paintings. The bold and rich and bright colours dominate at Lepakshi. Thematic programme and style may be compared on certain grounds. However, the date of Lepakshi paintings has been well established as 1540s.[16] Endorsing Kotraiah's view that the Hampi paintings possibly executed under the patronage of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya sometime after 1508 and buttressed with the above observations, it thus can be said that the *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* murals belong to Kṛṣṇadēvarāya's period.

Painting is undoubtedly an important aspect of the art historical studies. The date of the execution of these paintings unambiguously settles several questions about the development of mural tradition in Karnataka in particular, and southern India in general. It also serves as the base for post-Vijayanagara paintings since the post-Vijayanagara painting schools and styles have derived the idiom and inspiration from it as may be seen in the paintings at Hiriyur, Shibi, Sira, Kollegala, Mudukutore, Haradanahalli, Shravanabelagola, etc.

Pontiff's Procession: Śrī Vidyāraṇya or Śrī Vyāsa Tīrtha?

In this painting (fig. 31.1), the pontiff is seated in a palanquin carried by royal attendants (fig. 31.2). In the procession, there are soldiers, musicians, flag bearers, drummers on elephant and camel (fig. 31.2-31.4) and other royal retinue. The composition gives the impression that the procession is moving towards the Virūpākṣa temple through Virūpākṣa Bazar from Dodda Basavanna Maṇṭapa (Car Street – an open road in front of main entrance to the Virūpākṣa temple). The very composition of the painting is interesting from the point of entirety of the

ceiling panels. Thematically, the pontiff's procession appears like an intrusion into the main theme, and it seems to have been executed as an extension. Among the entire ceiling paintings, this is the only scene that seems to delineate a contemporary historical event.

Sivaramamurti[17] and Anna Dallapiccola[18] identified the figure of the pontiff as that of Śrī Vidyāraṇya Svāmi. Śrī Vidyāraṇya is regarded as the spiritual force behind the founding of the Vijayanagara kingdom in 1336 CE. And this is the principal reason for identifying him in the figure of the pontiff. Śrī Vidyāraṇya was not a contemporary of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. Nor is there any evidence for his stay in Hampi. On the other hand, both early inscriptions and Gangadevi's *Madhura-vijayam* attest that a Kālāmukha Śaiva ascetic called Kriyāśakti was the *guru* for early Vijayanagara rulers. The legend of Vidyāraṇya's role as the spiritual founder of Vijayanagara undoubtedly has high regards, but it should be remembered that as and when a new dynasty is empowered, the importance of spiritual personalities also changes. Therefore, we should regard the scene of pontiff's procession as historically nearer or contemporary to the king responsible for erecting the *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa.* In view of this, the present author is inclined to identify the pontiff figure in the painting as that of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha, a contemporary of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya.[19]

Śrī Vyāsatīrtha or Śrī Vyāsarāya was a Mādhva pontiff, and student of the Śrī Śrīpādarāya, the pontiff at Mulbagal. Śrī Vyāsarāya had been sent to Hampi as early as late fifteenth century.[20] He was the royal preceptor of Sri Kṛṣṇadēvarāya whose Vaiṣṇava leanings are too well known. He lived in Hampi even before Kṛṣṇadēvarāya's coronation in 1509/10 CE. He lived near Śrī Kōdaṇḍarāma temple where he had his school known as *Viśvapāvanī Viśvavidyālaya/ Ghaṭikā.* There were well-known students who studied and discoursed with him. He also spearheaded the 'Haridāsa Movement' in Karnataka. The great Haridāsas like Purandaradāsa and Kanakadāsa, and pontiffs like Śrī Vādirājatīrtha and Śrī Vijayēndratīrtha were his direct disciples.

A Sanskrit work entitled *Śrī-Vyāsayōgicharitam* composed by Kavi Sōmanātha[21] speaks about the achievements and glory of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha. This work as well as the chronicles of the Maṭha inform that Śrī Vyāsatīrtha removed *Kuha Yōga* obstacle of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. *Śrī-Vyāsayōgicharitam* also mentions that Śrī Vyāsatīrtha was honoured with *kanakābhiṣēka* by the king for all his blessings on the kingdom. The procession was organized in an open palanquin accompanied by all retinue, music bands, and mounted soldiers, camels with drums and all pomp and grandeur. The procession, as depicted in painting is heading towards the Virūpākṣa temple. Probably, the *kanakābhiṣēka* took place in *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* of Virūpākṣa temple. Śrī Vyāsatīrtha's importance at Hampi during Tuḷuva Dynasty, especially during reign of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya and his brother Achyutarāya was high. Moreover, Śrī Vyāsatīrtha was a royal preceptor of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. And hence, it should be appropriate that in the painting of procession, the figure of pontiff represents the pontiff Śrī Vyāsatīrtha.

Nava Bṛndāvana, the resting place of some Mādhva pontiffs with their memorials (called *Bṛndāvana*) at Anegundi also includes the memorial of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha. It has a beautiful portrait identifiable as that of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha. He left for immortal world in 1539 CE when Achyutarāya

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In this painting (fig. 31.1), the pontiff is seated in a palanquin carried by royal attendants (fig. 31.2). In the procession, there are soldiers, musicians, flag bearers, drummers on elephant and camel (fig. 31.2-31.4) and other royal retinue. The composition gives the impression that the procession is moving towards the Virūpākṣa temple through Virūpākṣa Bazar from Dodda Basavanna Maṇṭapa (Car Street – an open road in front of main entrance to the Virūpākṣa temple). The very composition of the painting is interesting from the point of entirety of the

ceiling panels. Thematically, the pontiff's procession appears like an intrusion into the main theme, and it seems to have been executed as an extension. Among the entire ceiling paintings, this is the only scene that seems to delineate a contemporary historical event.

Sivaramamurti[17] and Anna Dallapiccola[18] identified the figure of the pontiff as that of Śrī Vidyāraṇya Svāmi. Śrī Vidyāraṇya is regarded as the spiritual force behind the founding of the Vijayanagara kingdom in 1336 CE. And this is the principal reason for identifying him in the figure of the pontiff. Śrī Vidyāraṇya was not a contemporary of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. Nor is there any evidence for his stay in Hampi. On the other hand, both early inscriptions and Gangadevi's *Madhura-vijayam* attest that a Kālāmukha Śaiva ascetic called Kriyāśakti was the *guru* for early Vijayanagara rulers. The legend of Vidyāraṇya's role as the spiritual founder of Vijayanagara undoubtedly has high regards, but it should be remembered that as and when a new dynasty is empowered, the importance of spiritual personalities also changes. Therefore, we should regard the scene of pontiff's procession as historically nearer or contemporary to the king responsible for erecting the *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa.* In view of this, the present author is inclined to identify the pontiff figure in the painting as that of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha, a contemporary of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya.[19]

Śrī Vyāsatīrtha or Śrī Vyāsarāya was a Mādhva pontiff, and student of the Śrī Śrīpādarāya, the pontiff at Mulbagal. Śrī Vyāsarāya had been sent to Hampi as early as late fifteenth century.[20] He was the royal preceptor of Sri Kṛṣṇadēvarāya whose Vaiṣṇava leanings are too well known. He lived in Hampi even before Kṛṣṇadēvarāya's coronation in 1509/10 CE. He lived near Śrī Kōdaṇḍarāma temple where he had his school known as *Viśvapāvanī Viśvavidyālaya/ Ghaṭikā.* There were well-known students who studied and discoursed with him. He also spearheaded the 'Haridāsa Movement' in Karnataka. The great Haridāsas like Purandaradāsa and Kanakadāsa, and pontiffs like Śrī Vādirājatīrtha and Śrī Vijayēndratīrtha were his direct disciples.

A Sanskrit work entitled *Śrī-Vyāsayōgicharitam* composed by Kavi Sōmanātha[21] speaks about the achievements and glory of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha. This work as well as the chronicles of the Maṭha inform that Śrī Vyāsatīrtha removed *Kuha Yōga* obstacle of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. *Śrī-Vyāsayōgicharitam* also mentions that Śrī Vyāsatīrtha was honoured with *kanakābhiṣēka* by the king for all his blessings on the kingdom. The procession was organized in an open palanquin accompanied by all retinue, music bands, and mounted soldiers, camels with drums and all pomp and grandeur. The procession, as depicted in painting is heading towards the Virūpākṣa temple. Probably, the *kanakābhiṣēka* took place in *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* of Virūpākṣa temple. Śrī Vyāsatīrtha's importance at Hampi during Tuḷuva Dynasty, especially during reign of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya and his brother Achyutarāya was high. Moreover, Śrī Vyāsatīrtha was a royal preceptor of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. And hence, it should be appropriate that in the painting of procession, the figure of pontiff represents the pontiff Śrī Vyāsatīrtha.

Nava Bṛndāvana, the resting place of some Mādhva pontiffs with their memorials (called *Bṛndāvana*) at Anegundi also includes the memorial of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha. It has a beautiful portrait identifiable as that of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha. He left for immortal world in 1539 CE when Achyutarāya

was ruling from Hampi. It appears that Achyutarāya personally monitored the last rituals of the pontiff. It is the only memorial which is impressively decorated with sculptures and image of pontiff. This may be considered as an immediate portrait of the pontiff Śrī Vyāsarājatīrtha. Similarly, the Chitramaṇṭapa in Sri Prasanna Veṅkaṭaramaṇa temple in Mysuru has a narrative painting depicting the Hampi Kṣētra, and an image of a pontiff sitting with two of his disciples. Composed in a shrine-like frame, it has a Kannada inscription reading 'Vyāsarāyara Pāṭha', meaning the scene of 'Śrī Vyāsarāya teaching'. The painting has been depicted as part of 'Hampi Kṣētra Darśana' painting. The painting is dated ca. 1842 CE.[22] This firmly establishes Śrī Vyāsarāya's association with Hampi.

In view of the fact that in deciding the identity of the pontiff depicted in the ceiling painting of Virūpākṣa temple's *mahā-raṅgamaṇṭapa* it is appropriate to search for a spiritual contemporary of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya and that there is ample evidence of the Mādhva pontiff Śrī Vyāsatīrtha's contemporaneity and historical association with Kṛṣṇadēvarāya, this author strongly proposes that the famous 'procession scene' should be identified as that of Mādhva pontiff Śrī Vyāsatīrtha's procession[23] and not of Śrī Vidyāraṇya as hitherto believed.

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Notes and References

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11. Sivaramamurti, C. 1968: 83; 1985: 29.
12. Kotraiah, C.T.M. 1959: 228-237.
13. Rajashekhara, S. 1988: 202-203.
14. Dallapiccola, A.L. 1997: 55-56.
15. Kulkarni, R.H. 2022.
16. I have visited the Vīrabhadra temple at Lepakshi several times to research these paintings. As an art historian, my observations have been recorded in my earlier works.
17. Sivaramamurti, C. 1968: 83; 1985: 29.
18. Dallapiccola, A.L. 1997: 55-56.
19. Kulkarni, R.H. 2001: Hampe Virupaksha Devalayada Maharnagamantapada Olabhitti Chitra Vidyaranyarade? Vyasarayarade? *Itihasa Darshana* 16: 178-181.
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22. Kulkarni, R.H. 2022.
23. If we accept the author's argument that this painting depicts the procession of Śrī Vyāsatīrtha then it is likely that the royal figure on the elephant in the front part of the procession is that of Kṛṣṇadēvarāya. – Editor.

Fig. 31.1 Hampi – Virūpākṣa temple – Raṅgamaṇṭapa: Vyāsatīrtha procession

Fig. 31.2 Hampi – Virūpākṣa temple – Raṅgamaṇṭapa: Vyāsatīrtha in palanquin

Fig. 31.3 Hampi – Virūpākṣa temple – Raṅgamaṇṭapa: Vyāsatīrtha procession (rear side)

Fig. 31.4 Hampi – Virūpākṣa temple – Raṅgamaṇṭapa: Vyāsatīrtha procession - Virūpākṣa bazar